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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 004435

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: TOP SHIA ISLAMIST LEADER SAYS UNIFIED ELECTION
SLATE DEAL DONE

Classified By: CHARGE DAVID SATTERFIELD, REASON 1.4 (B)
AND (D).

1. (C) Summary: Senior SCIRI party leader Abdel Mehdi told Charge midday October 28 that the unified Shia Islamist party list for the December elections is nearly ready. The coalition's leaders are rushing to finish the bottom halves of the provincial election slates, and Abdel Mehdi anticipated they would make (barely) the October 28 filing deadline. He said that Muqtada Sadr has pledged to support the Shia Islamist coalition list. Ahmed Chalabi is not on the list, and some prominent independents from the Shia coalition in the transitional national assembly, such as Ali ad-Debbagh, also are absent from the new list. The coalition's platform calls for strengthening Iraqi security forces so that "foreign military forces" can be withdrawn from Iraq. It also urges establishment of regional entities in central and southern Iraq. Abdel Mehdi doubted that Ayatollah Sistani would back this list, but that it would be the biggest bloc in the future assembly with 100 seats or more in the 275 member assembly. The Kurds would have no choice but to join with this Shia coalition to set up the future government, a process that he thought would go faster than the painful negotiations that established the transitional government. End Summary.

Unified Shia Islamist List Almost Done

2. (C) Deputy President Adel Abdel Mehdi told Charge October 28 midday that the unified Shia Islamist party election lists was nearly finished. He said that the top names for each provincial election slate were finalized, and as Friday progressed the coalition's leaders were finishing the bottom halves of the election list. (While we were talking he received a call about the number eight slot on the Basra list.) Abdel Mehdi expected to be finished with the slates in time to meet the October 28 deadline, but he acknowledged it was very hard going.

Muqtada Sadr In

3. (C) The Deputy President confirmed that Muqtada Sadr would support the coalition. He viewed this as a useful element of a strategy to pull Sadrist out of street violence and into the political process. He said a big lesson from 2004 was that it is best to have open communication with Sadr.

Chalabi, Independents Out

4. (C) Abdel Mehdi, a senior SCIRI party leader, said that many persons lost out ("there were slaughterings") in the process of building the new coalition. Notably, the coalition would not include Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Chalabi. Abdel Mehdi said the coalition leadership invited him in, but with only three seats. Chalabi had decided to pursue his own list, and Abdel Mehdi thought it would be better for Chalabi to underline his secular credentials away from the Shia Islamist list. Abdel Mehdi said some familiar independents, such as Ali ad-Dabbagh, also would not be in the coalition, as well as some small Islamist parties like the Islamic Action Organization. Parliament Deputy Speaker Husayn Shahrastani is in the coalition.

Platform OK on Coalition Forces, Urges Federalism

5. (C) Abdel Mehdi let us review briefly the draft coalition election platform (three pages single-spaced in Arabic). It pledged to strengthen the capabilities of the Iraqi security forces so that foreign military forces, necessary in the past, can be withdrawn. It also calls for implementing CPA order 91 about qualifying members of "armed groups that had fought the previous regime - militias" into the security services. The platform calls for rapid movement towards establishing regional entities in the "center and south" of Iraq. It pledged to implement

article 58 of the transition law (about Kirkuk) and "correction" of borders to end disputes among Iraqis.

Faster Stand Up of New Government ?

16. (C) Abdel Mehdi recognized that there was some dissatisfaction with the performance of the Jafari government, and this might reduce its strength. He also stated that Ayatollah Sistani would not back the list and would stay out of the election race.

17. (C) Nonetheless, Abdel Mehdi anticipates that the Shia Islamist coalition will win 100 seats or more. He expected the coalition to be the largest bloc in the future national assembly and that it would choose the next prime minister. Acknowledging that he was a lead candidate, Abdel Mehdi noted that current Prime Minister Jafari has not relinquished the idea of staying in the job. Abdel Mehdi doubted that Jafari could get the votes even within his own Da'wa party, much less within the larger Shia Islamist coalition. The coalition would likely choose its prime ministerial nominee during the campaign, and Abdel Mehdi predicted that negotiations about the future permanent government could start even during the campaign. He anticipated it would be an easier set of negotiations than were the prolonged discussions in the spring of 2005 setting up the transitional government. The Kurds would have no choice but to cut a deal with the Shia Islamist coalition, he predicted. Abdel Mehdi didn't rule out former Prime Minister Allawi playing a role in the permanent government but not as prime minister.

18. (C) Charge said the U.S. had serious concerns about whether a unified Shia Islamist list would not aggravate the polarization within Iraqi society between Sunni Arabs, Shia and Kurds as well as secularists and Islamists. He urged Abdel Mehdi as a top leader of the coalition to find ways to reach out even during the campaign to ease this problem. Abdel Mehdi said the polarization is an unhappy fact in Iraq now. The Shia Islamist coalition would have to first tend to its base, but he acknowledged the utility of reaching out earlier, not later. Charge also underlined that the U.S. wants to see an effective, capable government. We prefer no repeats of the problems that have hurt ministries like Interior and Health. In specific, there must not be party or militia control or perceived control of ministries - especially the security ministries. This meant Badr and the Mahdi Army need to stay out. Abdel Mehdi pushed back hard initially, saying that there were still too many Baathists in the ministries. He asked for understanding that Iraq was still undergoing a transformation from Sunni and Baathist rule. Charge stressed that the issue was loyalty to the state and professional competence. Abdel Mehdi accepted the point. It was important for Shia and Kurds to be adequately represented in the ministries, but - he said - the time for constant purges of personnel was past - as the Alliance platform document confirmed.

Comment

19. (C) Evidently self-satisfied, Abdel Mehdi acknowledged that "two days ago we didn't know if we could achieve this list." The impact of the list on the December 15 elections and the next government will be significant. As we have reported, the Kurds have assembled a unified list, and the Sunni Arabs also have set up one major coalition list as well. We will send a separate analysis of the factors impelling Iraqi political forces to establish lists around ethnic and sectarian lines.

Satterfield